

Moriz Kaposi (1837–1902): Great Master of the Viennese School of Dermatology

Arty R. Zantinga, MA, and Max J. Coppes, MD, PhD

Moriz Kaposi (Fig. 1) was born Moritz¹ Kohn on October 23, 1837, into the small Jewish community of Kaposvár, Hungary, as the son of Salamon Kohn and Rosa Kohn, née Krauss. The Jewish birth registry shows this to be the 24th day of Tishri, 5598. Kaposvár is a small town and regional center for trade in grain and horses on the river Kapos, south of lake Balaton in Southern Hungary, situated close to the Hungaro-Croatian border of today. Unlike in Anglo-Saxon countries where the accent is put on the second syllable, the river Kapos, the town Kaposvár, and the name Kaposi all carry the accent on the first syllable [1,2]. Moriz Kaposi had a younger sister Julie, born in 1840, who later became Mrs. Ullmann, and a younger brother Bernhard, born in 1843. In 1871, Moriz Kohn officially changed his name to Moriz Kaposi because, as he explained to colleagues, he feared being confused with at least five other physicians who practiced locally and who had the same surname, one of whom also had the same given name [2]. Kaposi derived his new name from that of his birthplace. His brother Bernhard also adopted Kaposi as his surname in 1873.

Moriz Kaposi attended a Hungarian elementary school, received his first four years of German Gymnasium (upper secondary education) in his native city, and the four remaining years of Gymnasium in Pozsony (Pressburg, Bratislava) from which he graduated with honors. Subsequently, he enrolled in the Medical School of Vienna University in 1856. On December 13, 1861, he graduated as a doctor of medicine; on April 14, 1862, as doctor of surgery; and finally on July 12, 1866, as master of obstetrics [1,2].

Before shifting his endeavors to Dermatology, Kaposi worked in the Third Surgical Department of the Vienna Allgemeines Krankenhaus (General Hospital). Subsequently, he joined Prof. Carl Ludwig Sigmund's Department of Syphilology for two years [1,3,4], a unit that until October 1992 was known as the Second Department of Dermatology. In 1992, the Departments of Dermatology were joined together. At the same time he also served as director of the Löw Sanatorium [3]. During these years he met outstanding teachers, such as Dr. Skoda, Dr. Oppolzer and his future father-in-law Dr. Ferdinand Hebra, the founder of the School of Viennese Dermatology, which was regarded as the most important in German-speaking Europe.

In 1866, he became Private-Docent (Assistant Professor) following his Habilitationsschrift² entitled "Die

Syphilis der Schleimhaut der Mund-, Rachen, Nasen- und Kehlkopfhöhle" (Syphilitic changes of the mucous membranes of the mouth and upper respiratory and digestive tracts) [5]. In the same year he left Sigmund's Department, joined Hebra's, and expanded his area of expertise from syphilology to general dermatology. He contributed a series of papers on various dermatological diseases, completed most of the monographs in a textbook of Dermatology which he co-edited with Hebra [6], and carried out some research dealing with the etiology and histology of individual diseases. These included rhinoscleroma (which had been discovered by Hebra), the cause of impetigo contagiosa faciei, erythema multiforme, and the fungi causing mycoses [3].

On February 6, 1869, he married Martha Hebra and became the son-in-law of the Chairman of his Department. His relationship with Ferdinand Hebra was good, as reflected by his father-in-law's response to his request for a dowry: Hebra is believed to have promised him six of his wealthiest patients afflicted with intractable psoriasis (oral tradition). Kaposi and his wife had five children, among them Richard, who became a mineralogist; Herrmann, who became a surgeon; and Walter, who became a doctor of science but was killed in action in 1915 during the winter battle in the Carpathians at the age of 30. It is assumed that Kaposi converted from Judaism to Roman Catholicism, since in the marriage certificate Kohn is listed as Catholic [1].

In 1869, he wrote the first papers on lupus erythematosus still under the name of Kohn, and three years later, now as Kaposi, he published a more detailed description of this disorder [7]. Two years later he began his great

¹The birth registry spells Kaposi's first name "Moritz" as was common in German language. He himself, however, signed "Moriz" [1].

²A second thesis required in Germany to become a lecturer/professor, comparable to the Ph.D. degree.

From the Department of Cancer Biology, The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio.

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Address reprint requests to Dr. Max J. Coppes, Department of Cancer Biology NN1-12, The Cleveland Clinic Foundation, 9500 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44118.



Fig. 1. Moritz Kaposi (1837–1902), Photograph taken by J. Löwy, Vienna. Courtesy of the Institute for the History of Medicine, University of Vienna, Austria.

work: “Die Syphilis der Haut und der angrenzenden Schleimhäute” (Syphilis of the skin and the adjacent mucous membranes) [8], in which he put forward the notion that the several manifestations of syphilis, regarded by many authors as separate disease entities, are to be considered varieties of one and the same disease.

In 1872, he described idiopathic multiple pigmented sarcoma of the skin, an interesting clinical entity unknown up to that time [9]. This disorder was designated Kaposi sarcoma at the suggestion of Dr. Köbner in 1891. In his description of idiopathic multiple pigmented sarcoma of the skin, Kaposi presented the clinical features of five men over 40 years of age and a sixth case of a 8–10-year-old boy reported to him by Prof. Billroth. He stated that the disease was incurable and rapidly lethal (within 2 years), although two of his own patients were lost to follow-up. Kaposi did not describe underlying or associated diseases in these patients, nor does he discuss the sexual habits of the patients. Of particular interest is his view that this disorder is a generalized disease from the outset, rather than a local tumor that later metastasizes “While in carcinoma [melanoma] it may happen that the tumor remains localized for some period of time and

generalized carcinomatosis may ensue only by spread from such focus, for this disease³ [the pigment sarcoma] a preexisting systemic disease (‘Dyskrasie’) must be assumed” [9]. Initially, Kaposi sarcoma was regarded as a rare tumor, but in the 1960s it became apparent that it was a very common tumor. The incidence in equatorial tropical Africa may be 200 times greater than in Western Europe and North America [10]. Subsequently, Kaposi sarcoma was reported with increasing frequency in patients treated with immunosuppressive drugs, and in the past decade it has been found in patients suffering from the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). It is the publicity associated with AIDS that has aroused special interest in this tumor and brought the name of Kaposi back into the spotlight. There has even been some question as to whether Moriz Kaposi first described AIDS [11,12].

In 1875, he became a full professor while working in Hebra’s department. He was very productive and contributed to the understanding of many dermatological diseases in his well over 100 publications [13]. His series on therapy concerning the newly introduced vaseline, chrysarobin, and pyrogalllic acid resulted in their introduction into the therapeutic arsenal of dermatology [3]. Few people today are aware that an ointment containing a mixture of betanaphthol, chalk, soft soap, and lard—which probably was used for topical application in skin infections—is called “Kaposi ointment” [14]. In 1880, he published a relatively abbreviated summary on skin diseases from the Vienesse Dermatologic School, “Pathologie und Therapie der Hautkrankheiten” (Textbook of Skin Diseases) [15]. This textbook found a great response throughout the entire dermatologic world, was translated in many languages, and went through 5 editions, the last in 1902. It can be numbered among the most classic works in the medical literature [3]. With this work, Kaposi became independent from Hebra. He was elected acting chairman of the Department of Dermatology upon Hebra’s death and competed successfully with Dr. Hans von Hebra (Kaposi’s brother-in-law), Dr. Heinrich Auspitz, and Dr. Joseph Pick (in 1889 co-founder of the German Society of Dermatology) for the vacant position. Unconventionally, the search committee of the University of Vienna abstained from the usual Triple Proposal,⁴ but rather made a citation of *primo et unico loco* (one name in the first and only place): Moriz Kaposi [1]. On February 8, 1881, an appointment announced in an Imperial Resolution signed by Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria enabled him to take over the position of his fa-

³The German word used by Kaposi—*Uebel*—literally translated means “evil.”

⁴Giving the names of three suitable candidates.

ther-in-law, whom he would commemorate at his inaugural lecture later that same year [16].

In 1882, Kaposi reported on some patients in whom he had noticed skin changes during infancy or early childhood that continued throughout life and finally led to death by the development of various neoplasms [17]. He hypothesized an analogy with the aging skin, and this notion resulted in the acceptance of a new disease entity: xeroderma pigmentosum. We now know that this is a rare autosomal recessive disorder clinically characterized by extreme dermal sensitivity to sunlight or light in the wavelength range of 280–310 nm (UVB), and results from the lack of one of the specific enzymes capable of repairing damaged DNA.

Kaposi was an outstanding teacher and much sought after as a speaker, albeit he was a sharp critic, feared for his caustic remarks. He had a splendid memory; in addition to his native Hungarian, he was fluent in German, French, and English, and had an extraordinary knowledge of the literature [2]. Kaposi wherever possible sought to encompass the totality of symptoms as manifestations of a single disease, rather than separate them for the sake of describing something “new” [3]. He was a member of many national and international dermatological societies and served the International Congress of Dermatology in many ways. He was its host and president in 1892, one of the foreign secretaries in 1896, one of the vice-presidents in 1889, and together with Jonathan Hutchinson one of the honorary presidents in 1900 [1]. Among the many honors bestowed on him, the most important were his membership of the Imperial Order of Emperor Leopold, his appointment as “Hofrat” (Imperial Counselor), the highest possible academic title in Austria, his election both as an officer of the Legion d’Honneur of France and as a corresponding member of the Académie de Médecine de Paris.

In October 1900, just a day after celebrating 25 years as professor, he suffered a slight stroke from which he fully recovered. He subsequently continued his professional duties until exactly a year later when he suffered a second, more serious, stroke. He could, however, not completely hold back from his work and continued his lectures and some of his other duties at the hospital. He died on March 6, 1902. Two days later, he was laid to rest in the presence of many of his patients, colleagues, students, and all of name and rank in Vienna [3]. With him died “. . . a jovial, lively person . . . gentle in his private life . . . a great diagnostic talent, a great spirit, a restless worker, and a good human being” [3], a man who at a congress had claimed: “I trust myself to treat all the skin diseases with five agents; it is the ‘Why’ which is important.” Hungary recently honored him on a stamp issued by the Hungarian Postal Service during the 14th International Cancer Congress held in Budapest, August 21–27, 1986 (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Dr. Moritz Kaposi honored on a stamp issued by Hungary in 1986 to commemorate the meeting of the 14th International Cancer Congress in Budapest. Courtesy of Dr. Gyula Nagy, Department of Dermatology, Kaposi Mór Komitát Krankenhaus, Kaposvár, Hungary, and Dr. Marc A. Shampo, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota.

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